



The argument that an **economic crisis** is good for design or an opportunity to morally cleanse after a period of excess is far from the harsh reality of a recession, says *Kevin McCullagh*

Right: Gerrit T Rietveld's Zig Zag chair, 1934, wrongly held up as an example of a depression inspiring good design

Below: Extravagant design-art by Fernando and Humberto Campana, the Banquet Chair with Pandas for Estúdio Campana

Is there an upside to the recession? Quite a few people seem to think so. David Goodhart, editor of Prospect magazine, hopes for a good recession in which only rich bankers will be laid off, and the effects of which will be largely 'cleansing'.

The design version of this argument would have Zaha Hadid, Ross Lovegrove, Marcel Wanders, and Campana Brothers canned; and a moral reawakening would replace stylistic decadence. With echoes of the early-Nineties, designers are again beating themselves up over their supposed excess. Back then, they regretted the superficiality of Eighties' Post Modernism and the matt black and chrome-trimmed Yuppie lifestyle. Today, outlandish architecture and design-art are placed alongside Damien Hirst's Diamond Skull and the Candy and Candy's apartments as symptoms of empty extravagance.

But the Bring-On-The-Slump crowd are equally self-indulgent. Recessions are marked by bankruptcies, mass unemployment, house repossessions and general misery, not by moral renewal. A mean-spirited Puritanism lies behind those beckoning recession.

Their outlook reveals a shocking detachment from economic and historical realities. The recessionists just don't get it, they have not grasped the depth of the economic crisis we face. This is no mere downturn, blip or 'natural correction'; it's a process that will last years. It could inflict a terrible toll on the profession. No doubt these commentators come from the kind of backgrounds that weren't blighted by previous busts, but few practising designers and architects will be able to maintain such glorious indifference in the face of the coming havoc.

The prospect facing young designers is particularly bleak. Ian Cochrane, director of Ticegroup and former managing director of both Fitch and Landor Europe, recently gave a clue to what might happen. He recommended that design agencies should consider a three-day week, and advised design students to 'get out of this business... [which] does not need you'.

Today's Puritans are motivated by a mix of environmental, psychological and aesthetic concerns.

Anti-growth is a deep-seated

sentiment. Here, economic growth is held to be destructive, wasteful and 'unsustainable'. This tendency looks forward to the cuts in consumption that falling living standards will bring. Goodhart hopes that the recession will 'cut energy use and make people more open to arguments about constraints on consumption'.

Other 'anti-stuff' advocates bend more towards Oliver James' notion of affluenza, believing that wealth leads to mental illness. Cutting back, it's felt, would clear the mind. All take the benefits of growth for granted, while kicking away the steps of the majority below them who are still struggling to reach such a contented security.

Then there are the 'Less is more' aesthetes, who reject the visual experimentation of the past few years as 'fluff' and tasteless excess. They often point to the flourishing of design in the 1930s, thinking that the economic constraints of the Great Depression prompted design innovation. But the pioneers of the Bauhaus and elsewhere were inspired by the radical ideas of Modernism, not the make-do-and-mend constraints of the depression.

Other design puritans hope that less building will lead to more thoughtful architecture. But why should fewer buildings necessarily be better buildings? Quality is far more dependent on ideas, ambition and funding – all of which look like being in short supply. A cursory glance around our urban landscapes



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can surely only lead to the demand for better and more architecture?

Unfortunately, there are plenty of guilt-ridden designers and architects who are predisposed to these wrong-headed ideas. Even before the recession many were encouraged to worry about their work's lack of meaning and contribution to landfill, by the 'anti-stuff' and 'anti-fluff' moralisers. The problem is that this sense of shame is not based on a clear analysis of the benefits people gain from stuff relative to overblown problems like landfill. The self-doubt instead stems from the intellectually-paralysing effect of sustainability ideas. These simultaneously inflate the size of problems, and then promote low-impact gestures instead of grand-scale solutions. The objections to the Severn tidal barrage on the grounds of its potential effects on the bird habitats, is a classic example.

The depth and length of the recession is unclear, but we can also start to make out an altered client landscape emerging from the embers. Britain's financial services sector, so long a driver of design budgets, will contract. The creeping expansion of the state sector will also reverse, as weak public finances will dictate cutbacks. The largely forgotten manufacturing sector is likely to weather the storm better than most, as its export focus should benefit from the humbling of the pound. Designers would do well to use their downtime to develop their knowledge of such sectors, and re-orientate themselves towards designing some big scale solutions that the New Puritans continually duck.

What is certain is that as job losses cut deeper into the creative sector, talk of the benefits of a good recession will go down as well as a banker's bonus.



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